



Frank Clark

The Fife Flyer

Prior to Frank Clark's breakthrough into the top flight of Marathon running, Scotland had no elite

marathoners, let alone anyone who had bettered three hours in a *bona fide* marathon race on British soil. In the previous year's inaugural Powderhall Marathon, the first Scot home had finished only seventh in a time several minutes outside three hours. However, overseas in Canada, a Scottish expat called Alex Rowan had in fact broken the three-hour barrier. Rowan had finished second in a professional marathon race at Vancouver on 21st August 1909 in a time of 2:55:32. In all likelihood, though, no-one in Rowan's native Scotland was any the wiser! Frank Clark's performance in the 1910 Powderhall Marathon was, therefore, something of a revelation.

Frank Clark (assuming the name was not an alias) was a miner from the village of Glenraig by Lochgelly, Fife. He was of Irish extraction having been born at Ballina, County Mayo. He may well have worked at the Glenraig Colliery, although there were several collieries in the area, which sits upon a rich seam of coal.

His athletic achievements were all the more noteworthy considering the arduous nature of his employment and the tough conditions under which he worked. Fife pits were among the deepest in Scotland and prone to deadly firedamp, not to mention roof falls and miscellaneous other perils.



A view of the village of Glenraig in bygone days. The electric tramway in the picture was a branch of the Dunfermline to Lochgelly line laid in 1908.

A relative newcomer to marathon racing, Clark supposedly discovered his own abilities as a long-distance runner while training with Alex ‘Sandy’ Haddow in his race against John McCulloch of Strathmiglo from Glenfarg to Cowdenbeath. A former winner of the Powderhall Mile, Haddow (1874) was a miner from Midcalders and lived in nearby Lochore. Prior to making his marathon debut, Clark had been prominent at distances ranging from the half mile to twenty miles. His first major taste of success came at Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh, on 6th January 1905, when he took full advantage of 145 yards start to win the mile handicap in 4min 25sec. Clark would, whenever possible, compete in both the one mile and two mile handicaps at highland gatherings, which were a huge attraction in those days. When Clark won the Mile Handicap at the Thornton Highland Gathering on 26th July 1907, he did so in front of 50,000 spectators.

His first ‘Marathon’ was at Methil, a distance of twelve miles, when he came in first, beating Haddow.

Shortly after that, on 19th June 1909, Clark finished a highly creditable second behind *Evening News* Marathon champion Charlie Gardiner in the twenty-mile ‘Marathon’ held in conjunction with the Glasgow Police Sports at Celtic Park. The Fifer gave the Londoner more than he bargained for, running neck and neck with Gardiner throughout and conceding defeat by only six yards in a splendid time of 1:58:05.

At the Blairadam and District Games on 26th June 1909, Clark won the ‘Marathon’ of ten miles ahead of Haddow and Butchart of Kirkcaldy. For good measure, he also entered the two-mile race and finished

second!

He next won a twenty-mile championship race at Strathaven, and a few days after that met Gardiner again at Riccarton, Edinburgh, in a twenty-mile race. With neither man giving any quarter, the race almost ended in a dead heat. At the finish the judges gave Clark the verdict, but when he came out of the stripping hut he found that the decision had been reversed and Gardiner declared the winner.

On 26th July 1909, Clark beat local rival Alex Haddow and W Swan of Catford in the £7 Marathon Race at the Kinross Games, completing the ten-mile course in 57 minutes.

A month later, Clark and Gardiner again crossed swords in the fourteen-mile Perth-Birnam road race held in conjunction with the Birnam Highland Games on 25th August. In a close finish, Gardiner again had the upper hand, staving off the challenges of Clark and Haddow to win in 1h 21min.

On 30th October 1909, Clark showed a decent turn of speed when he ran 4:28 from a start of 80 yards to take second place in the handicap mile race at Powderhall Grounds.

It all augured well for the Powderhall Marathon on Monday, 3rd January 1910. Sensing probably that Charlie Gardiner was vulnerable only two weeks after beating Dorando in the Albert Hall Marathon, the bookmakers made Clark the evens favourite. This was quite an accolade in view of the quality of the international entry numbering fifty nine runners in all. On the day, a field of thirty runners faced the starter in rough conditions. After allowing Gardiner to set the pace for the first twelve miles, Clark forged ahead, leading through fifteen miles in 1:27:54 with only England's Jack Price to worry about. Price actually caught Clark just before the twenty-mile post, which they passed in 1:58:47. The race thereafter consisted of Clark dourly churning out the miles with Price tucked in behind sheltering from the fierce crosswind. Not once did the Englishman venture to take over the pace-making duties. There was an air of inevitability when Price went past Clark in a decisive fashion two laps from home, opening up a gap of some 200 yards to win in a new British record of 2:40:07.5. After passing the winning post, Price waited for Clark to arrive, and the pair sportingly shook hands. The exhausted Clark was rewarded for a gutsy performance with an outstanding Scottish record of 2:40:54.0.

When asked by a local newspaper about his training after the Powderhall Marathon, Clark stated that he usually walked about two miles before breakfast. In the afternoon, after coming home from the pit, he would do between five and six miles not too fast, and fifteen miles about twice a week.

Clark among the invitees to the prestigious *International Marathon Derby* at New York on 2nd April 1910. He arrived in New York on 4th March and was initially scheduled to compete in a twenty-mile race at

Madison Square Garden on 14th March. However, for reasons unknown he scratched from this and all subsequent races in the USA. It appears that Clark actually retired from competitive running altogether. One suspects it was an untimely injury that ended his meteoric rise from the coalfields of Fife to marathon running fame.

(Extract from Alexander Wilson's forthcoming publication on the Powderhall Marathon.)